



The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Education Review
College of Education

Journal Homepage: [Texas Education Review](#)

Published online: February 2019

[Submit your article to this journal](#)

Theoretical Starting Points: The Field of Emerging Research Universities

SEAN A. RYAN

University of North Texas

To cite this article: Ryan, S. A. (2018). Theoretical starting points: The field of emerging research universities. *Texas Education Review*, 7(1), 76-84. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/13>

Theoretical Starting Points: The Field of Emerging Research Universities

SEAN A. RYAN
University of North Texas

In 1960, recognizing the lack of preparedness on the part of public higher education to deal with the drastically increasing population, California enacted legislation that included universal access to community colleges, increased support for state college polytechnic programs, and continued emphasis on the university research mission. The California Master Plan for Higher Education, formally implemented through the Donahoe Higher Education Act (1960), was developed by leaders from various fields, including public and private higher education, business, and government. Clark Kerr (2001), then President of the University of California (UC) and a key person in the development of the plan, remarked that more than anything, it was “a desperate measure to prepare for a tidal wave of students, to escape state legislative domination, (and) to contain escalating warfare among its separate segments” (p. 172). Yet the plan, and more importantly the vision it put forth, developed the largest number of high-level research campuses in the U.S. while ensuring the educational demands of an advancing technocratic society would be fulfilled.

The California Master Plan created a coordinated field of higher education in which the various institutional sub-fields understood their particular missions and could plan accordingly. A primary concern of the planners was the desire for state colleges to be recognized as research universities and share in the federal research and development money such status brings. At the time, California had 15 percent of the country’s research universities, but comprised less than 10 percent of the nation’s population (Kerr, 2001). Understanding the need for polytechnic education the state colleges provided, as well as the increased operational costs that research status brings, the responsibility for academic research remained within the UC system. It was understood by most policy makers and higher education leaders that California did not need any more research universities at that time (Kerr, 2001).

The State of Texas

The state of Texas at the turn of the new millennium, was in a much different predicament with regards to public research universities. There were only two Texas public universities that would be considered tier one, the popular and informal designation referencing institutions that produce the highest levels of academic research as defined by the Carnegie Foundation Classifications (n.d.). Here, I refer to these institutions as Research Universities One (R1). California, a state often used for comparison with Texas due to its relative population size and gross domestic product output, had eight public institutions that were R1 in 2003. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) recognized that federal research support was the primary contributor to such activity, and recommended an increase in the proportion of such funding, setting various benchmarks pertaining to science and engineering obligations to Texas universities. In an effort to increase the state university proportion of federal research dollars, THECB provided formal recommendation to the Texas Legislature with *Closing the Gaps by 2015*, establishing benchmarks that called for an increase from 5.5 percent of federal research obligations in 2000 to 6.2 percent by 2015, amounting to more than doubling total research expenditures during that time period (THECB, 2000).

In 2009, the Texas legislature created the Texas Research Incentive Program (TRIP), providing matching funds to private gifts for a newly established institutional grouping known as Emerging

Research Universities (ERU). Later that year, the National Research University Fund (NRUF, 2009) was established, creating a dedicated and independent fund to assist ERUs in achieving national prominence with regards to research status. Then Governor Rick Perry believed the NRUF would serve as a “clear road map to help emerging research institutions reach the next level” (UH, 2009). Benchmarks for the NRUF included restricted research expenditures of at least \$45 million, commitment to high quality graduate education, and awarding of at least 200 Ph.Ds annually (NRUF, 2009).

Academic Drift

California state colleges and ERUs in Texas demonstrate the various ways that states approach the dilemma of academic drift (Kerr, 2001). Public institutions straying from their traditional roles in search of prestige can underserve the demands of students while bringing about higher education systems that are more expensive (Morphew, 2009). California recognized the need for affordable polytechnic education, and a coordinated system ensured that access to a quality higher education be available to all state residents. Texas encouraged state universities to strive for status associated with academic research by rewarding such behavior with the lure of additional funding. Comparing the ideologies that drive policies in both Texas and California demonstrates the differences between equity-driven policy versus policy driven by privatization and competition. These states’ policies emphasize the influence that ideology has on how organizations react to state policy and organizational legitimacy. The desire for status is apparent in both situations, though in the context of Texas, ERUs have begun taking on attributes and characteristics of organizations that are more expensive to operate and maintain, a problem for institutions that have historically served as access points for bachelor’s degrees. The increased emphasis on research productivity at state institutions occurs within the same policy environment that demands these institutions are more efficient and affordable. How can these seemingly competing priorities coexist?

Strategic Action Fields

Efforts to prevent or persuade increased emphasis on academic research at state colleges and regional universities demonstrate how emerging fields of higher education can be influenced through various policies and incentives. Utilizing the concept of strategic action fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) this paper explains changes in organizations by providing insight into how state policy influences constructed, meso-level social orders. Expanding on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1996) concept of fields, defined as the structured arena where practice occurs, strategic action fields extend the analysis to that of groups of actors competing for advantage and resources to increase their capabilities and reputations.

Strategic action fields are socially constructed in that they are based on subjective standings. They have boundaries that shift based on varying situations and promote a set of shared understandings amongst their members that are fabricated over time. Membership within a specific field is limited to “those groups who *routinely* take each other into account in their actions” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 168), thus within this analysis, only universities and colleges who strive for R1 status are included. Removing all other actors from the field analysis brings attention to the relationships between groups who compete for position within the particular field, exposing precisely what is of value in these relations. In the case of state colleges in 1960s California and ERUs in present day Texas, external research funding is a coveted resource, but it is only a means to achieving prestige associated with tier one status.

Membership and Field Dynamics

It is understood that all fields emerge and change over time. Moreover, fields are made up of incumbent groups—those who possess disproportionate advantages against groups of challengers who wield fewer resources and influence over field dynamics. The aim of incumbent groups is to solidify their advantage within the field, while the role of challengers is to take advantage of opportunities that increase their influence amongst the status hierarchy. These moments of contention can be caused by various exogenous shocks or even instability within corresponding fields that send ripples through the greater field environment (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

These constructed social orders are meso-level in nature in that they are made up of fields and sub-fields that are hierarchically structured based on a perceived social status. The relative position between and within various groups determines an institution's legitimacy (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). All fields are embedded within a complex web of other fields, each possessing varying levels of potential and influence over their own affairs and the functioning of others. The state can be seen as a set of strategic action fields that have tremendous influence over shaping the practice and stability in almost every non-state field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). The set of shared understandings that govern individual fields are defined by the state and serve the interests of incumbent members by reproducing field conditions that will continue to be self-serving in determining the standards of prestige. Fields are often managed by various Internal Governance Units (IGU), non-state actors who assist in the reproduction of field conditions (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

Fields of American Research Universities

The field of American research universities can best be understood as a general field, made up of four-year universities that conduct academic research and educate doctoral students. Within this field, there are various subfields determined by a particular institution's ability to conduct research. The boundaries of these sub-fields vary but are generally determined by one's designation by the Carnegie Classifications (2018). It is important to note that these classifications should not be thought of as rankings but are intended to provide a framework of comparable institutions for educational and research purposes. These classifications take into account various metrics related to research, and are generally most competitive and status worthy within the sub-field distinction of R1. Within this subfield of research universities, status hierarchy is most sensitive at the top, as competition for resources is fierce between those institutions with the strongest abilities. Those universities located towards the bottom pay close attention to their actions and those of peer institutions most similar to their capabilities. Worse than not reaching R1 status is emerging into this sub-field and then falling out five years later. The Carnegie Foundation, unintentionally of course, functions as an IGU, as its classifications serve as a symbolic system that legitimates the hierarchical arrangements of the field. The rules and standards of the field ultimately benefit those with the most advantages, further solidifying their presence within the social order's hierarchy.

Establishing Incumbents

Inspired by the German universities of the 19th and early 20th centuries, early American research universities increasingly became concerned with graduate education and the advancement of knowledge. At the beginning of the 20th century, the presidents of the 14 leading research institutions convened the Association of American Universities (AAU), an organization dedicated to the standardization of Ph.D. requirements in an effort to gain recognition of American doctoral pro-

grams. These AAU institutions can be viewed as the incumbent members of the newly formed field of American research universities.

Reliance on external sources of funding was a common theme amongst early research universities. As the procurement of the social resources needed for academic research became an increasing concern, revenue from undergraduate tuition continued as a primary source of funding. Prior to World War I, the 14 member institutions of the AAU enrolled 10 percent of American college students, an enrollment needed to supplement the cost of recruiting faculty, educating graduate students, and building physical space for experiments to take place. These federal initiatives continued on a massive scale through World War II and during the Cold War grants from the Department of Defense, Department of Energy, and, eventually, the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Health served as major sources of research funding (Geiger, 1989). As the federal government established policy regarding federal research and development, incumbent institutions within the field were involved in shaping the shared understandings that define the field rules.

Neoliberal Policy Environment of Texas

Neoliberalism's influence on the political culture of Texas over the past two decades has shifted popular opinion regarding the purpose of higher education from being a public to a private good (Harvey, 2007). Through an agenda centered on less government and stricter adherence to free-market principles of privatization, deregulation, and competition, it is believed that policy that reflects the neoliberal ethic will result in improved efficiency, quality, and affordability within the public sector (Harvey, 2007). Privatization of public higher education occurs through shifting the responsibility of obtaining a college degree to the individual. One of the primary purposes of higher education is to promote social mobility among members of society, as it provides individual students with the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for employment in the marketplace (Labaree, 2005). It is believed that because the individual is benefiting from obtaining a college degree, higher education is a private good, thus the responsibility rests upon the student.

This ideological shift has also had financial repercussions for public institutions through the reduction of state appropriations and the deregulation of tuition setting authority, shifting a larger share of the financial burden to students. Since 2003, tuition setting authority in Texas has been vested with public higher education systems or institutions, allowing universities the ability to raise their price without any oversight by the state.

Unlike many public services, higher education is capable of generating a large portion of its operating budget through tuition and fees. Because of this feature, public higher education is often targeted for larger budget cuts during troubled economic times. Being disproportionately affected by economic cycles, public universities are becoming more reliant on sources other of revenue to maintain operating budgets and provide stability (Doyle & Delaney, 2009). Unfortunately in Texas, as in the nation, these shortfalls in public support are supplemented by increases in tuition and fees.

Isomorphism and Academic Drift

Within an established field, institutional efforts employed to deal with uncertainty often lead to decisions and policies that make organizations more similar in structure. Facing similar environments, organizational tendencies to resemble one another is understood as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This process can result from pressure being exerted by formal and informal stakeholders or through institutional responses to uncertainty, which leads to imitation. Universities, in an effort to seem more legitimate, often mimic other organizations that are perceived to be successful. This competition for status encourages homogenization within a field, as prestige and resources are

rewarded for efforts to appear more legitimate to peers and innovative to stakeholders (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Faced with an environment in which external funding became synonymous with increasing prestige and legitimacy, a growing administrative bureaucracy shifted resources in directions believed to ensure a stable flow of research revenue (Morphew, & Baker, 2001). The generation of revenue through faculty practices has always been a fundamental component of American higher education, as the teaching and academic research that make up the bulk of their time can contribute large sums to university operating budgets. The difference between the universities of today and those of the later 20th century, lie in the “breadth and depth” of such market-based behaviors (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

NRUF Benchmarks and “Competitive” Markets

Public policies that create competitive funding for resources reward institutions not for efficiency and innovation but for meeting policy objectives that have little to do with free-market principles or the benefit of public higher education. The belief that competition will make universities more efficient with public money, while also making them more accountable to so-called consumers, ignores the difficulty of productivity growth within complex personal services, such as higher education (Giroux, 2010). Redirecting resources towards research requires efforts to control costs, possibly leading to diminished quality, such as increasing class sizes or raising the number of courses a faculty member teaches each year. These efforts would generate more semester credit hours per year for the faculty members and departments, but bigger classes and more students will most likely not lead to better education (Archibald & Feldman, 2010).

The quasi-markets in which ERUs compete lack components essential to free economic markets, such as the free flow of producers, open competition for resources, regulation determined by price-based exchange between buyer and seller, and the production of goods which are rivalrous and/or excludable. Institutions are rewarded not for economic efficiency but for meeting policy objectives that have little to do with the principles of *laissez-faire* exchange, allowing particular institutions, which are well situated within the field, disproportional access to these awards (Taylor, Cantwell, & Slaughter, 2013). Competitive funding policies do not address the issues of public policy environments, as free-market solutions misunderstand the unique nature of public goods.

Carnegie Classifications as a Symbolic System

Financial resources are not the only capital being coveted by universities looking to expand their research abilities within the field of ERUs. Status and prestige provide these institutions with perceived legitimacy, and the importance of enrollment growth leads university administrators to pursue various rankings or statuses in order to attract students. Research has become emphasized by state policy makers as an opportunity to raise revenue and prestige for universities becoming less reliant on state appropriations. As institutions dealt with financial uncertainty, decision making tended to take the form of mimicking the characteristics and attributes of organizations that are understood to be successful. This organizational behavior was fueled by a rankings regime (Gonzales & Nunez, 2014) that promoted increased institutionalization by formalizing standard perceptions of excellence within the field, leading institutions to drift from their historic missions and purpose as regional public universities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This academic drift has drastic implications on the institutional diversity of Texas public higher education, as many regional universities began pursuing research status (THECB, 2000).

In search of legitimacy, ERUs continue to become more institutionalized through the various ranking systems and the influence these organizations have on external resources. This influence is more likely to impact decision making at institutions that are vulnerable to status hierarchy created by the ranking regime (Bastedo & Bowman, 2009). Increasing revenue through faculty activities such as research, promotes external revenues while also increasing the prestige of the institution. Faculty work is turned into a commodity with exchange value, continuing neoliberalism's privatization of public higher education (Gonzales & Nunez, 2014, p. 13).

Attempts to increase a university's reputation, as a research intensive institution, requires increasing the amount of federal funding the institution receives for research, an incredibly expensive and challenging undertaking. In order to be competitive for federal research funds, universities must invest in infrastructure and specialized faculty who will conduct such investigations. As the role of faculty is shifted towards specialized areas of research, the administrative bureaucracy continues to grow as a result of movement away from teaching and shared governance (Morphew & Baker, 2004, p. 369).

More than anything, competition for stagnant resources has led to an increasing proportion of the cost of research activities to be picked up by the institution itself. The outdated funding system for research funding does not work well for a community that has grown by a factor of 12 over the past 50 years. Institutional expectations for research generation have expanded, while funds for research have remained flat. Even in the present reality in which universities face increased competition for external resources, while funding an increasing share of research operating costs, institutions continue to stay the course out of fear of being left behind (Stephan, 2012, p. 149).

Implications for State Higher Education

The search of prestige is believed to underserve the demands of students while bringing about higher education systems that are less affordable (Morphew, 2009). The tendency for institutions to become more similar is problematic for American higher education systems. Additionally, as universities that historically served as access points for public education begin taking on the characteristics and attributes of more costly institutional types, those most in need of the social mobility that higher education can provide are the most likely to be priced out of the market (Archibald & Feldman, 2009). Many different types of colleges and universities allows for greater learning options for students while also providing systems that can adapt and change to specific public needs. Institutions have grown less diverse in past years, even when there has been vast change in almost every other facet of higher education (Morphew, 2009). California understood this in 1960, and though it seemed as if Clark Kerr and other Master Plan designers were playing favorites when they denied California state colleges from establishing research university status, they knew the field conditions only benefited incumbent members. To be fair, Texas only had three research universities in 2000, while California had eight in 1960. Additional R1 universities were needed in Texas, but competitive and market-based policies created priority contradictions for institutions asked to chase prestige while also being fiscally accountable to the public. When it was realized additional research universities were needed in California, new UC campuses were built rather than allow state colleges to emerge. The mission of the polytechnic campuses was too important to the social mobility and efficiency of state educational efforts. It was also a way of discouraging any additional colleges that wished to emerge within the sub-field of R1.

Reflecting back on the Master Plan more than 40 years later, Kerr summarized the coordinated efforts of California as simply a "triumph of collective good judgment" (Kerr, 2001). As state legislatures determine how to accomplish specific goals related to the development of human capital and the financing of public higher education, it is important to understand that organizations re-

spond to incentives and pressures from a range of stakeholders that exist within multiple fields. Uncoordinated competitive policies aimed at increasing the number of R1 universities rewards prestige and status, which undermine access to educational opportunities, particularly for those most at risk of being excluded.

Sean Ryan, M.Ed., is a doctoral candidate at the University of North Texas studying higher education. His research emphasizes the historical legacy of status and inequality as it pertains to organizational decision-making and higher education policy.

References

- Archibald, R. B., & Feldman, D. H. (2011). *Why does college cost so much?* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The rules of art: Genesis and structure of the literary field*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. (n.d.). *About Carnegie Classification*. Retrieved from http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/lookup/standard.php#standard_basic2005_list
- DiMaggio, P., & Powell, W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147-160.
- Donahoe Higher Education Act, Cal. Education Code § 22500 (1960).
- Doyle, W. R., & Delaney, J. A. (2009). Higher education funding: The new normal. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 41(4).
- Fligstein, N., & McAdam, D. (2012). *A theory of fields*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Giroux, H. (2002). Neoliberalism, corporate culture, and the promise of higher education: The university as a democratic public sphere. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(4), 425-464.
- Geiger, R. (1989). *To advance knowledge: The growth of American research universities, 1900-1940*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Gonzales, L. D., & Nunez, A. (2014). The ranking regime and the production of knowledge: Implications for academia. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22(31), 1-20.
- Harvey, D. (2007). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Kerr, C. (2001). *The gold and the blue: A Personal memoir of the University of California 1949 – 1967*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press.
- Labaree, D. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 39-81.
- Morphew, C. (2009). Conceptualizing change in the institutional diversity of U.S. colleges and universities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(3), 243-269.
- Morphew, C. C., & Baker, B. D. (2001, April). *The administrative lattice and the new research I universities*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- National Research University Fund (NRUF), 81 TX. Leg. § 51.358 (2009).
- Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism in the new economy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Stephan, P. (2012) *How economics shapes science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, B. J., Cantwell, B., & Slaughter, S. (2013). Quasi-markets in U.S. higher education: The humanities and institutional revenues. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 84(5), 675-705.
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2000). *Closing the gaps by 2015: The Texas higher education plan*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/reports/PDF/0379.PDF?CFID=79378812&CFTOKEN=53922124>
- Thelin, J. (2011). *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.